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## THE MORAL ELEMENT IN GOTTFRIED'S TRISTAN UND ISOLDE.

Few poems of German literature have given rise to so various and contradictory opinions as has Gottfried's *Tristan und Isolde*. Virtually all critics agree as to the beauty of the descriptions and the mastery of the niceties of style. The melodious flow of the verse, the limpid beauty of the language, and his surprising power of psychological analysis have earned for Gottfried the title of a master of his art and a high rank among German poets of any age. Few writers have excelled him in the ability to paint the conflicting emotions of the heart under the stress of an overpowering passion. Many of the older critics, however, rendered their tribute of praise almost in spite of themselves, for all this manifold beauty was in their minds only the attractive cloak for gross immorality and excited only aversion and disgust. The severe condemnation which the legend received at the hands of the poet Southey, for example, is too well known to need more than a passing mention.<sup>1</sup> His attitude is pardonable when one remembers that he was acquainted with the tale only in the crude, unpolished English version of *Sir Tristrem*. One is, however, surprised at the harsh criticism passed on Gottfried's poem by so able and, as a rule, so just a critic as Karl Lachmann, who said of it: "anderes als üppigkeit oder gotteslästerung boten die hauptteile seiner weichlichen, unsittlichen erzählung nicht dar."<sup>2</sup> Massmann likewise, in his edition of Gottfried, expressed himself in terms hardly less severe.<sup>3</sup> Groote,<sup>4</sup> who was one of the first to protest against the severe criticism of the poem, tried to condone the sin of the lovers by declaring that Isolde was married to Marke only in appearance and that Tristan was her real husband. In this he was followed by Simrock in his translation of Gott-

<sup>1</sup> Introduction to *The Byrth, Lyf and Actes of Kyng Arthur*, etc. (London, 1817), Vol. I, p. xv.

<sup>2</sup> LACHMANN, *Auswahl aus den mhd. Dichtern des 13. Jh.*, p. vi.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. p. xi.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. the introduction to his edition of GOTTFRIED'S *Tristan* (Berlin, 1821), p. xvi.

fried.<sup>1</sup> That this view, however, is untenable, everyone who has read the poem attentively is well aware. Later critics, therefore, have contented themselves in the main with emphasizing the fact that Gottfried has taken a story of crime and low intrigue and transformed it into a poem of surpassing beauty. This is true enough, although much of the credit for doing this belongs in all probability to Gottfried's source, the French poet Thomas. This evidence is, however, largely æsthetic in character, and is not valid in the sphere of morality. The proofs must be sought rather in the motive which inspired the author, and in the difference of attitude on questions of morality and custom existing between mediæval and modern times. It is, therefore, the purpose of this study to consider the subject from these two points of view, to institute an inquiry into Gottfried's motive in writing the poem, to investigate his method of depicting the love scenes and his attitude toward the legend, and lastly to bring as much light to bear upon his conceptions of honor and virtue as may be gleaned from what he himself tells us in the poem.

Taking up first the question of motive, it will be generally admitted, I think, that in the realm of literature this is a prime factor in deciding questions of morality. It is not so much the incidents narrated, but the way in which they are told and the purpose animating the author, which form the final court of appeal. The historian or the literary artist may deal with the most delicate subjects, if his purpose be to instruct or admonish. To select only one of the many examples which suggest themselves to the mind: the so-called problem plays of modern literature may be disagreeable, they may depict a side of life whose existence we would gladly deny, but only a complete misconception of their purpose can lead us to call them immoral. When, however, a writer becomes purposely suggestive, when the motive is no longer to point a moral, but to appeal to depraved tastes, to excite the senses by veiled allusions or by detailed descriptions of erotic scenes, then we are forced to admit that he has been guilty of immorality which no art, however skilful, will excuse.

When we consider Gottfried's poem from this point of view,

<sup>1</sup> P. 395.

we find that it belongs to the first category. It is the narrative of an overpowering passion from which it is impossible for the victims to escape, which overthrows the barriers of honor and virtue, renders the lovers miserable despite their love, and finally leads to their tragic death. That Tristan was predestined for such a life of sinful love is clearly pointed out by Gottfried. Had the poet lived in the nineteenth century, he would have talked a great deal about environment and inherited predispositions. Having had the misfortune of being born over six hundred years before Darwin and the modern scientific school, he did what was virtually the same thing—he gave the detailed history of Tristan's parents to show that he was predestined for such a life by being a child of love. Furthermore, when the name Tristan is given to the hero, Gottfried comments upon its appropriateness, deriving it from the French *triste*. "Behold," he exclaims, "what a sad life was given to him to live!"<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, the poet did not live to complete his work, but we know from the English *Sir Tristrem* and the Norse saga how Thomas finished the story, and there is not the slightest doubt but that Gottfried would have ended the poem in a way which would have made it perfectly clear that the tragic death of the lovers was the necessary consequence of their sin, and the atonement for it. In fact, he indicates this in ll. 2011–15, where he remarks:

Sehet an den trûreclichen tût,  
der alle sine herzenôt  
mit einem ende beslôz,  
daz alles tôdes übergênôz  
und aller triuwe ein galle was ;

"a death which surpassed all other deaths and which contained more bitterness than any other sorrow." This passage occurs near the beginning in the description of Tristan's christening and strikes at once the keynote of the whole poem.

Gottfried's purpose is, therefore, to depict the course and the tragic consequences of a sinful love. In no case does he endeavor to present this love in an attractive or alluring light—quite the contrary. Toward the end of the poem his comments upon honor

<sup>1</sup> "Sehen wie trûreclich ein leben  
Ime ze lebene wart gegeben" (l. 2009).

and virtue in women become more and more frequent. It is as if he felt his end approaching and did not wish to leave the world in doubt as to his attitude toward the story. Thus, after Tristan is banished from Marke's court, the poet remarks that no good woman would give up her honor to save her life.<sup>1</sup> A few lines farther he adds: "There is no more beautiful thing in the world than a woman who is devoted to *mâze* [i. e., moderation]. The man who is loved by such a woman is the possessor of every earthly joy and carries a living paradise in his heart. He has no cause for anxiety and need not desire to exchange his life for that of Tristan, for a faithful wife does more for her husband than ever Isolde did for Tristan."<sup>2</sup> Surely no words could express more clearly the critical, nay condemnatory, attitude of the poet toward the legend. Again, in another passage, just after the lovers have yielded to their fatal passion, he moralizes at some length upon infidelity in love. "We have a false conception of love," he tells us. "We sow weeds and expect roses and lilies to spring up, and this cannot be; we must reap what we sow. We sow love with falseness and dishonesty, and so it bears only evil and pain. Real love has been banished and we have naught but the name."<sup>3</sup>

Let us now turn to the consideration of the second point, that of method, and inquire how Gottfried has treated the love scenes in the poem. This, as has already been brought out, is of the greatest importance in judging of the morality of a piece of literature, for it gives us additional and important evidence as to the motive of the author. The question in Gottfried's case is doubly important, since the character of the story is such that a poet who delights in depicting scenes of passion has ample opportunity in the course of the narrative to indulge his bent to the full.<sup>4</sup> A study of Gottfried's poem from this point of view reveals at once the fact that the poet observes the utmost delicacy in dealing with erotic situations. He introduces love scenes only where he cannot avoid them without departing from the story, and when he does introduce them, it is done so simply, so charmingly, that we

<sup>1</sup> L. 18000.

<sup>2</sup> Ll. 18101-12.

<sup>3</sup> Ll. 12230-12351.

<sup>4</sup> Cf., for example, SWINBURNE's treatment of the legend in his *Tristram of Lyonesse*.

cannot take offense.<sup>1</sup> Take, for example, the love scene between Tristan's Rivalin and Blanche flour. It was necessary for the poet to describe this scene in some detail in order to show that Tristan was a child of love. Here was a chance to indulge in description of the most erotic character. But what do we find? A scene so artless and so touching in its simplicity and delicacy that one must search far to find its equal. Overcome by her grief at Rivalin's supposedly fatal wound, Blanche flour falls in a swoon upon the edge of his couch. Her sweet presence revives in the dying hero the almost extinct spark of life. Their lips meet in kisses and then the poet adds simply:

dâ nach so was vil harte unlanc,  
 unz daz ir beider wille ergie,  
 und daz vil süeze wîp enpfie  
 ein kint von sinem libe.

—Ll. 1320-23.

So much was necessary, as stated, to show the character of Tristan's conception; the rest is left to the imagination of the reader. Here there is certainly no attempt at passionate, or even suggestive, description, and yet this is the most detailed of all the love scenes of the poem. What would not a Wieland or a Byron or a d'Annunzio have made of this episode?

Further, when after drinking the fatal potion Tristan and Isolde have confessed their mutual love and Brangaene consents to provide them with an opportunity to meet rather than see her mistress pine away, and Tristan steals softly to Isolde's darkened cabin, we should expect of a mediæval poet a most detailed description of the scene. Gottfried, however, merely relates how the physician Love took the lovesick Tristan by the hand and led him to the bedside of Isolde and gave him to her and her to him as medicine. Love bound their hearts so firmly, he tells us, that they could never be severed.<sup>2</sup> Then, instead of describing

<sup>1</sup> For some of the following examples I am indebted in the first instance to R. HEINZEL, "Über Gottfried von Strassburg" (*Zeitschr. f. d. Österreich. Gym.*, 1868), pp. 548, 549, who collected a number of instances. J. FIRMERY, in an essay, "Notes critiques sur quelques traductions allemandes de poèmes français au moyen âge," *Annales de l'université de Lyon*, nouvelle série, II, 8, has also emphasized the delicacy with which Gottfried treats the love scenes in his poem. Not having access to this series, I am unable to say how fully Firmery has treated of this point.

<sup>2</sup> Ll. 12161-86.

the scene further, he begins a long rambling discussion of two hundred lines on the character and the effects of love, in the course of which he condemns a passion based upon treachery and deceit, and sings the praises of a love coupled with fidelity. When he finally returns to the lovers, it is only to remark that they succeeded in curing one another of their sorrow and pain.<sup>1</sup>

Again, no incident in the poem has given more offense than the substitution of Brangaene for Isolde. This is not the place to justify its introduction, as we are concerned here only with Gottfried's method of treatment. Suffice it to say that he found the incident in the original, and that it seemed to offer the only way by which Brangaene might save the reputation of her mistress and make good her negligence which had brought upon the lovers their fatal passion. Now how does Gottfried treat so difficult a scene? Brangaene at first refuses thus to debase herself and consents only after repeated urging, and because she feels that she must pay the penalty of her carelessness and at any cost save the honor of Isolde, for whose happiness the queen had made her responsible. There is no detailed description of the scene. The poet hastens to assure us that Brangaene's thoughts were "lûter unde guot," and that she slipped away as soon as the object of the substitution had been accomplished.<sup>2</sup>

In the other recorded instances of meetings between the lovers Gottfried contents himself, as a rule, with the mere mention of the fact, as, for example, in the series of rendezvous in the orchard during Marke's absence. Here we read merely that they met without detection eight times in as many days.<sup>3</sup> In the beautiful idyl of the *Minnegrotte* we find lengthy descriptions of nature, of the arrangement of the grotto, of the manner in which the lovers passed their days, but not even the mention of a love scene, although the opportunity to introduce such a passage could not

<sup>1</sup> Ll. 12362 ff.

<sup>2</sup> In no case does Gottfried indulge in ribald jokes upon delicate situations, as do the later French versions of the legend. The attitude of the latter has been well shown by Heinzel with reference to the scene where Tristan, disguised as a pilgrim, stumbles and falls when carrying Isolde ashore. A comparison with the corresponding passages in the saga and the English poem also shows that the humor in Thomas must have been much broader, and furnishes additional evidence in proof of Gottfried's desire to avoid coarse and indelicate expressions.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. ll. 14506-10.

have been more favorable. Had Gottfried been fond of indulging in erotic descriptions, he would not have allowed so favorable a chance to pass unused.<sup>1</sup>

Judged, therefore, from the standpoints of motive and method, Gottfried must be exonerated from much of the blame attached to him. There are still some objections, however, which remain to be answered. Chief among these is the fact that the poet does not directly pose as a moralist and that he does not censure the lovers more severely. It has been pointed out that Marke, the deluded husband, plays the part of a stupid fool who deserves to be deceived for his credulity, and that those who act as spies upon the lovers are not represented as champions of morality, but are accused of a lack of courtly breeding (*unhövescheit*). This is to some extent true, but it does not prove Gottfried's frivolity as conclusively as has been claimed. Those who make this criticism quite forget that a piece of literature must be judged from the viewpoint of the time and place in which it was written. Not only customs, but also the conceptions of honor and virtue, vary from age to age and may be different in different parts of the world, or in different classes of society.<sup>2</sup>

The people of the Middle Ages, and especially those classes among whom chivalry took its rise had a more naïve way of looking at things than we today. Their ideals were often totally different from ours and resembled more those of the ancient world. The moral value of absolute truthfulness does not seem to have been appreciated by them any more than by the Greeks, who admired above all things craftiness and cunning. Tristan of our poem is just such a character as Ulysses or Pylades. With a quiet smile on his lips and with an ingenuity which astonishes us, he invents again and again the most plausible stories to account for the condition in which he found himself at a given moment.

<sup>1</sup> In one case, it must be admitted, Gottfried does seem to depart from his usual practice, when he describes the position in which Marke discovers the lovers asleep in the garden, ll. 18199-18218. This admits, however, of an easy explanation. Just as an unusual amount of detail was given in the love scene between Rivalin and Blancheffleur to show the nature of Tristan's conception, so here too Gottfried probably felt it necessary to describe the scene in such a way that Marke should have at last unequivocal proof of the character of the intercourse existing between his wife and his nephew.

<sup>2</sup> A strong presentation of these facts in dramatic form is to be found in SUDERMANN'S *Ehre*.



Thus, when he had been carried off by Norwegian traders and landed on an unknown coast, he tells the pilgrims whom he meets that he had lost his way while hunting in the neighborhood. Not only does he invent the story, but he describes the circumstances with such minutiae that he is at once believed. That we are expected to admire him for his ready invention is evident from the words with which the episode is introduced.<sup>1</sup> Again, on his second trip to Ireland Tristan goes boldly on shore, although he knows that the Irish have sworn to kill all men from Kurneval, trusting to his skill in deceiving to preserve him from harm. He makes no pretense of concealing his purpose from his fellow-travelers, but says frankly: "I must lie to them today to the extent of my ability."<sup>2</sup> Such examples occur frequently, and might be largely multiplied if space would permit.<sup>3</sup>

That not only Gottfried, but also his contemporaries, justified such deceit is shown by the fact that Tristan was universally considered as a model of courtly breeding. As strict a moralist as Thomasin von Zirclære holds him up as a pattern for the young to follow.<sup>4</sup> Similar characters are found in the *Iwein* of Hartman von Aue, whom Gottfried took as his model. Thus the waiting maid Lunette and the young squire, who successfully deceived their mistress and induced her to marry the hero, are highly extolled.<sup>5</sup> Further, the maid who cured Iwein of his madness is called wise because she tells a falsehood (*lügenmaere*) to account for the disappearance of the salve used in the cure.<sup>6</sup>

Another feature in which the age of chivalry differed from modern times, and which has a still closer bearing upon the question of Gottfried's morality, was the stress laid upon the strict observance of a formal courtly etiquette (*hövescheit*). Provided a man followed its dictates to the letter, other qualities were of little importance. This was, after all, only natural, for it was courtly breeding which had gradually transformed the semi-barbarous western lands into a semblance of culture and civiliza-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. ll. 2690 f.

<sup>2</sup> Ll. 8709, 8710.

<sup>3</sup> Other examples are found: ll. 3079 ff.; 7905-14; 8185-8212; 8800 ff. In one case the poet goes out of his way to show the advantages of such forethought, as he calls it.

<sup>4</sup> *Der welsche Gast*, l. 1051: "an gevuoc folgt ir Tristande."

<sup>5</sup> Ll. 2181-84 and 2218.

<sup>6</sup> Ll. 3657 ff.

tion. It alone distinguished often the knight from the *vilein* or boor, the noble of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries from his warlike but uncouth ancestors. The courtly poets are, therefore, continually using the phrase *durch hövescheit* in commenting upon the fine breeding of their heroes.<sup>1</sup> Even more popular epics, such as the *Nibelungenlied*, make similar use of it.<sup>2</sup> Now, one of the worst infringements of this formal etiquette is tale-bearing. No matter what happened, courtly etiquette demanded that a knight should be able to hold his tongue. The poems of the minnesingers are full of severe condemnation of the envious *merkaere*, who disturbed the peace of lovers. Gottfried, we find, takes the same view. He accuses the knight Marjodo and the dwarf Melot, who betray Tristan to Marke, of *unhövescheit* and scores them in no measured terms. He begins chap. 24 with a long homily on the despicableness of false friendship in general and that of Marjodo in particular, and even goes so far as to call the knight a dog and the dwarf a serpent, although he usually avoids such expressions as being uncourtly. We find Eilhart taking exactly the same view in his version. In fact, he waxes still more indignant at the "boorishness" of the knight, whom he calls a coward (*zage*), and whom he wishes the devil would drown in the Rhine for his false friendship toward Tristan. His statements are called *nidesch lügenmære*, although they are only too true.<sup>3</sup>

Still another conception which we must thoroughly understand in order to avoid misjudging Gottfried's poem is the courtly use of the word *êre*, which seldom meant "honor" in the modern acceptation, but generally signified "reputation," the respect in which a person was held. Honor with us is mainly subjective;

<sup>1</sup> Cf. *Flore*, 3924; *Parzival*, III, 1611; *Iwein*, 788, 3387.

<sup>2</sup> *Nibelungenlied* (Lachmann), 131.

<sup>3</sup> LICHTENSTEIN's edition of EILHART, I. 3171. A most striking instance of the extent to which this etiquette was carried is furnished by the episode in which Isolde wins her case when subjected to the trial by hot iron by appealing to the *hövescheit* of God (II. 1554 ff.), Gottfried has been accused of blasphemy because of this remark, but has been well defended by BECHSTEIN, in his Introduction, p. xxx, and by KURTZ, *Germania*, Vol. XV, pp. 207 ff. and 322 ff. Before Gottfried HARTMANN had already spoken of God's *hövescheit* (*Erec.*, 3460), and the expression is also used by ULRICH VON LICHTENSTEIN (*Frauendienst*, 180, 8) and by ABRAHAM A SANTA CLARA (*Judas*, III, 27). Cf. SPRENGER, *Zeitschr. f. d. Phil.*, Vol. XXVI, p. 284, and HERTZ, *Tristan und Isolde*<sup>3</sup>, p. 544.

in the poems of chivalry it is principally objective.<sup>1</sup> It was synonymous with outward appearances, and so long as these were kept, *êre* was untarnished. This is clearly brought out in Gottfried's poem. When, for example, Isolde succeeds in triumphantly standing the test of the hot iron, the poet remarks that her *êre* was restored,<sup>2</sup> whereas from a modern point of view the deceit to which she had recourse dishonored her more than ever. Again, when the lovers are banished from the court, they do not grieve on account of their guilt toward Marke, but solely because the discovery of their sinful love had brought upon them the loss of their reputation at the court.<sup>3</sup> And when Marke concludes to take them back into favor, they rejoice especially over their restoration to *êre*.<sup>4</sup>

Most characteristic for the courtly conception of honor is the attitude of the lovers after drinking the love potion. The thought that it would be more honorable to accept the consequences of their love does not seem to have occurred to them. In their minds it was decidedly less dishonorable to deceive Marke than to cause a public scandal. Tristan had promised to obtain the hand of Isolde for his uncle, and this promise must be kept or he would be dishonored, i. e., would lose his *êre*. The poet does not leave us in the slightest doubt as to which was the correct course for Tristan to pursue. Line 12511 he remarks:

swie sanfte uns mit der liebe si,  
so müezen wir doch ie dâ bi  
gedenken der êren.

Again, a few lines farther down (12517-22) he continues:

swie wol Tristande tæte  
daz leben, daz er hæte,  
sîn êre zôch in doch dervan.

<sup>1</sup> Of sixty-eight occurrences in *Iwein* only one cannot be construed in an objective sense (l. 3046), and in scarcely more than a half-dozen cases is it used as we now employ the word.

<sup>2</sup> "Daz si an ir êren genas" (l. 15754).

<sup>3</sup> "Sine haeten umbe ein bezzer leben  
niht eine bône gegeben,  
wan eine umbe ir êre" (ll. 16879-81).

<sup>4</sup> "Die fröude heten s'aber dô  
vil harter unde mêre  
dur got und durch ir êre" (ll. 17700-17702).

sin triuwe lag im allez an,  
 daz er ir wol gedæhte  
 und Marke sin wip bræhte.<sup>1</sup>

Love and honor are in conflict, and although the former had conquered before, now honor is triumphant and love is forced to give way for the time being. A modern poet would have treated the subject in the very opposite manner. He would have shown that true honor demanded above all absolute truthfulness, and would have made Tristan confess to Marke the secret of his love, and either allowed him to suffer the consequences of betraying the king's confidence, or, if the story was to end happily, would have made Marke magnanimous enough to pardon Tristan's fault and renounce all claims to Isolde.<sup>2</sup> Gottfried, however, is a child of his time, and we cannot expect him to exhibit feelings and hold ideals different from those of his contemporaries. It is, therefore, unjust to call him immoral because he places *êre*, i. e., reputation, above absolute truthfulness.

Another characteristic difference existing between modern times and the age of chivalry which must be borne in mind in judging of Gottfried's poem is to be found in the attitude toward the passion of love. Civilization was cruder, men were more naïve in those days, and their passions were not held in check by considerations of propriety and of society as in our time. Love was supreme, and few ties, however sacred, could stand before it. The many *tagelieder* of the Middle High German and the *albas* of Provençal literature are not creations of a depraved morality, but expressions of the belief that love carried with it its own justification under all circumstances. The prevailing custom of marrying young girls, often against their will, for family or state reasons to men whom they often had never seen had resulted in the

<sup>1</sup> This whole chapter throws most interesting light on the conceptions of *êre* and *triuwe*.

<sup>2</sup> IMMERMANN attempted to modernize the legend in this way by having the lovers prepare to commit suicide before landing. He, however, shrank from the complete change in the story which this would involve, so that his attempt remained half-hearted and ineffectual. JOSEPH WEILEN is the only one, so far as I know, who has consistently modernized the poem by having the lovers struggle successfully against their passion until Tristan can leave the court. Weilen, however, spoils his drama by the unnecessarily tragic character of the close. The difficulties attending the remodeling of the legend for modern dramatic purposes have been interestingly discussed by BECHSTEIN, *Tristan und Isolt in den deutschen Dichtungen der Neuzeit* (Leipzig, 1876).

gradual degradation of marriage. The question as to whether love could exist between husband and wife we find being discussed and gravely decided in the negative.<sup>1</sup> The frequent lack of congeniality led husband and wife to bestow their affections elsewhere. Such secret love naturally attracted the adventurous spirit of the knights, and the prudence and cunning necessary to escape detection possessed a similar charm for the woman of leisure.<sup>2</sup> The result was that violations of the marriage tie were not considered so heinous nor were they so severely punished as in a stricter age.

An interesting example of this is to be found in MS R of Raimbaut de Vaqueiras's poem *Carros*, where the marquis finds his wife asleep in the arms of the troubadour, much as Marke discovers Tristan and Isolde. Instead of avenging his honor on the spot, the marquis merely substitutes his cloak for that of Raimbaut, as Marke does with the swords in the grotto scene, and leaves the lovers undisturbed. When the troubadour awakes and sees that he has been detected, he proceeds at once to the injured husband and begs his pardon. This the latter grants, with the remark that he forgave the theft this time, but that it must not occur again. Such indifference on the part of the marquis seems incredible to us. It offers, however, a most striking parallel to our poem, and at the same time a commentary on the lack of spirit which Marke exhibits.

The susceptibility of woman to love is the favorite theme of the troubadours. Arnaut Daniel once declared that there was no woman who did not wish to yield and who would not, if rightly wooed.<sup>3</sup> It was considered wrong, however, to yield lightly to the solicitations of the lover. Eilhart expresses this view clearly when he makes one of Isolde's ladies-in-waiting indignantly spurn the advances of Kehenis.<sup>4</sup> Gottfried likewise is far from being an apostle of indiscriminate love. If, however, love already exists between a man and a woman, if it has proved too strong

<sup>1</sup> "Utrum inter conjugales amor possit habere locum?" MS de la Bibliothèque Nationale, No. 8758, fol. 56. Cf. MARY LAFON, *Histoire littéraire du Midi de la France* (Paris, 1882), p. 110.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. JUSTIN H. SMITH, *The Troubadours at Home*, p. 59.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 218.

<sup>4</sup> LICHTENSTEIN's edition, ll. 6742 ff.

for them, if they have been forced to surrender to their passion, then it is foolish to have further scruples in the matter. This is the feeling of the age of chivalry, and Gottfried makes this clear when he remarks, that those who have gone so far that all strangeness between them has ceased to exist are thieves of their own happiness if they do not give themselves over to the enjoyment of their love.<sup>1</sup> This is such a matter of course for Gottfried that he wastes no further words upon it. The intrigues and deceit necessary to procure the enjoyment of this love he considers deplorable, but nevertheless justifiable. If, then, love be thought to be an overpowering passion to which everyone must yield whom it makes its prey;<sup>2</sup> if, moreover, it be so supreme that no obligation, however binding, can stand before it, then the actions of Tristan and Isolde are certainly less reprehensible from this point of view than when judged by our moral standard. From the standpoint of courtly chivalry, Gottfried's Tristan is in many respects the ideal lover, devoted to his mistress and faithful to the end.<sup>3</sup> He is no gay, wanton butterfly fluttering from one flower to another, but a man whose whole life is filled with this one passion—his love for Isolde.

Whatever, therefore, may be the general opinion of the immorality of the legend in its cruder forms, it must be evident from the arguments adduced that no blame attaches to Gottfried, unless indeed we go so far as to censure him for choosing such a subject for poetic treatment. Granted, however, the right to select such a theme—and no less a man than Goethe was a strong champion of the freedom of the poet in this respect—then we must concede that Gottfried has sought throughout to lift the tale out of the realm of the commonplace into the sphere of the ideal, that under his pen the story of a guilty passion becomes a grand picture of two souls struggling against an overpowering love, which draws them slowly but surely together and from which

<sup>1</sup> Ll. 12380-90.

<sup>2</sup> This is made clear by Gottfried in ll. 12180-86. In BEROL and EILHART the love ceases when the effect of the philter ceases; in GOTTFRIED it lasts till death.

<sup>3</sup> In EILHART Tristan's marriage with Isolde of Brittany finally becomes one in reality as well as in name. In the courtly version, however, he remains faithful to his first love. This trait of fidelity has been exquisitely portrayed by WILLIAM MORRIS in his treatment of this episode.

there is no possibility of escape—a love which renders its possessors, not happy, but miserable, and which finally ends in their tragic death. We have seen that the poet does not hold the lovers up as examples for us to imitate; on the contrary, he pauses again and again to sing the praises of virtue and moderation (*māze*) in woman. His views on honor and love, which differ so radically from ours, find their explanation in the attitude of the age of chivalry touching these points. His motive has been shown to be pure, and the evident intention to refrain from all mention of unpleasant or gross thoughts, and the delicacy with which scenes of the most intimate character are depicted, suffice finally to clear him of the least suspicion of immorality. With an unsurpassed beauty and melody of verse, with a marvelous knowledge of the human heart, and a searching analysis of motives and emotions, Gottfried has succeeded in giving us a poem which will stand for all time as one of the few great tragedies of love, and which must disarm criticism except on the part of those who fix their eyes obstinately on one point and thus fail to see the grandeur of the struggle and the beauty of the description which have placed the poem in the front rank of the literature of the world.

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